

THE MORALITY OF ABSTENTION

By FREEMAN TILDEN



A FRIEND OF MINE asked me the other day what I thought of the candidates nominated in the two Chicago conventions. I replied that I felt pretty much as the Thracian King, Poltis, felt about the Trojan War.

My friend is a successful businessman, but he has not dabbled in the classics, and his first thought was that the Trojan War was another adventure of the United Nations. So I hastily explained my allusion.

A handsome Asiatic prince named Paris took advantage of the absence of King Menelaus of Sparta to woo Queen Helen and carry her off to Illium, together with a considerable part of the crown money and jewelry. That brought on the famous feud described in the *Iliad* of Homer. Among the neighboring kings to whom Menelaus made application to help him redeem his wife and what was left of his honor, was this Poltis. But Poltis was unromantic. He had no desire to get mixed up in the tawdry affair, but he made a fair offer. "Menelaus has lost his wife", he said, "and evidently Paris wants one. Now I have two wives that I can easily spare. I'll give one to Menelaus and the other to Paris. That ought to fix it up." (The offer was refused and the war went on, which was fortunate, for otherwise we should have had no *Iliad*.)

Now, I am willing to be just as generous as Poltis. If there should happen to be two foreign countries presently in danger of going to war over the question as to which should possess an executive that they both hanker for, I will give one of them the Republican candidate and the other the Democratic candidate. I can spare both of them.

My friend knitted his eyebrows and was silent for a spell. Then he said, in a rather frightened way, "I hope that this doesn't mean that you don't intend to vote!"

I asked him if he thought I should.

"Why, you *must* vote one ticket or the other", he replied. "It's your duty as a citizen."

I was waiting for that one. I knew it was bound to come. If not at once from my friend, then certainly every day, week after week, on the radio, for several months before the election. "No matter how you vote: vote as you please: but vote. It is your duty as a citizen."

I have been hearing this fallacy — usually hitched up with another fallacy that I shall come to later — for a good many years. How effective it is I have no means of

knowing, but if it has any effect upon the electorate whatever, it must be owing to the vulnerability of the public to any misinformation that is announced with enough oracular smugness.

There is no such thing as a *duty* of the citizen to vote. There is the *right* to vote, if certain legal requirements be fulfilled, but the right to do implies the right to abstain. There is the whim to vote, the excitement of voting, the expediency of voting, the sense of power that comes with casting a ballot — a dozen other elements that may be mentioned in relation to exercising the suffrage. Duty there is not. The word “duty” is associated only with the morality of the individual. It cannot be related in any direct way with the practice of politics.

To obey the laws, or to try to obey the laws despite the welter spawned so rapidly that even lawyers do not always know what the law is, is the *duty* of the citizen. To defend his nation against invasion is clearly a *duty* of citizenship: and even though defense has been of late construed as meaning that the defense line is at every spot on the habitable globe, it is better, in my opinion, to accept that bewildering policy as a point of duty, and hope for better days. Mere physical exhaustion and bankruptcy can deal with that theory. These are the two duties of the citizen, and they are duties because they are his moral obligations. They are his contractual price of police protection.

The duty of the citizen in respect of exercising his suffrage is not, primarily, to vote. It is to consult his intelligence and his conscience, both, to inquire on what grounds he *can* vote: his intelligence because if he lacks intelligence he will not be aware of conscience; his conscience, because if that is not active, his intelligence will merely direct him toward adjacent self-interest.

Love of one's native land, gratitude for participation in its benefits, concern for its welfare, jealousy for its honor, are not duties owed to the nation. They are the fruit of duties that the citizen owes to his character. These duties performed faithfully, the citizen lays the base for his own moral conduct, and only from such moral individual conduct can you ever expect a moral State.

A GOOD MANY YEARS AGO I was taught a wholesome lesson by a humble telegraph operator out in Santa Cruz, California. He was a member of the Socialist Labor Party. He was not noisy and nothing of a proselyter. But he had soberly concluded that the principles of his small group were humane and wise, and so every four years he marched himself to the polls and cast his vote for somebody who had no more chance of being elected President than of selling fire extinguishers in Hades. I said to him, out of my sapience: “Why, you are just wasting your vote!”

My good telegrapher friend didn't tell me off for the ass that I was revealing myself to be. He replied, gently: "No, I don't think so. I've tried my best to think things out. I've come to certain conclusions. I may be wrong. But, I don't just vote. I vote for something I believe in."

I didn't think then, and I don't think now that the Socialist Labor Party was the answer to the prayer of the American maiden. But I was convinced that I had been talking with a good citizen — one who had been referring moral problems to his conscience, and letting his political participation stem from that source.

The first presidential campaign that I can remember was that of 1896. I was a schoolboy at that time, but my father, who was a newspaper editor, used to talk grown-up words to me, and took me into his confidence. He was a Democrat. It was a time when the Democratic and Republican parties really stood for definite concepts of government. My father was a Democrat because he was for a low tariff and was against centralization of government, while the Republicans honestly avowed their enmity toward state rights and worshipped at the temple of a Protection for infant industries that had already burst the seams of their pants. The lines were sharply drawn.

But in 1896, Bryan, the silver-tongued salesman of hokum, captured the Democratic party with his "free coinage of silver". Was my poor father in a dither! He couldn't very well vote for Protection and Federalization, but he also couldn't vote for one whom he regarded as a mountebank with a poisonous economic nostrum. I remember he told me, in a confidence, that he couldn't vote, if he was to have only a Hobson's choice. Fortunately, the Gold Democrats organized a splinter party, with Palmer and Buckner as candidates, and my father could then cast a vote with belief.

I remember saying to him: "Palmer can't win, can he?"

"Oh, no, not a chance."

"Well, then, aren't you helping elect McKinley?"

He looked at me a minute. Then he said, "Freeman, I shall vote according to my convictions as to what's best for the country. I never vote *against* anything or anybody. I vote *for* something or somebody."

I couldn't help remembering that conversation of long ago, when the elections of 1948 came along. It was so apparent that of the votes Dewey received, the major portion were not votes for him, but merely Republican habit votes and votes against the Roosevelt Legacy. How could it have been otherwise with a candidate and a platform based solely upon the assertion it was "time for a change". A change of what? A change of directors of the identical policy, to be sure.

IF IT IS *quantity* of votes you want, then of course you will sound the tocsin and jangle the doorbell. If it is *quality* you want, there will always be absentees of intelligence and conscience where there is a segment of the public whose conception of sound government finds no expression in person or party. If the contest of 1952 were sharply defined, you would have no need of Boy Scouts campaigning to "get out the vote".

The real division, upon which most else could be based, is between Conservative and Radical — just to give names to the age-old conflict of political thought. If that were the test in 1952 you would get votes enough. I dare say the Conservatives would be soundly thrashed, because the trend is not their way. But they would not need to apologize to themselves. They would have done their duty by their personal integrity. But in a time when conservatism is entirely unrepresented, where does the Conservative go?

"But", says my friend, "if you don't vote, you are abetting corruption in government." This is the attendant fallacy of which I have spoken. It is based upon the pleasant theory that all bad or imbecile people are feverish to vote, and therefore the "good" man must vote to cancel them out. In the first place, I doubt it can be proved that all evil people vote; or that all the "good" people who do not vote would vote with high and disinterested intelligence if they voted. But even if it were so, the thought is repugnant to some of us that we should vote merely to nullify somebody else. I doubt that corruption in government can be laid at the door of the man who did not vote. It seems to me that those who did vote should assume the blame.

It is a curious fact about abstention that it seldom gets an individual in trouble. Think back over your career, and how many times did *not doing* something ever get you in trouble? Wasn't it rather the things you *did* that landed you in a mess? Socrates referred to this fact when he said that his "daemon" never told him what to do; but often warned him what he should *not* do. Consider whether the corruption may not be the result of antecedent quantitative voting.

Besides, though I abhor corruption in government as much as anybody, I think it may be overdone as campaign material. In representative government, corruption emerges from war, unwise legislation, the creation of dark bureaucratic corners, and the like. It accompanies *more* government, and diminishes when you have *less* government. It is not economically significant, for it does not in any important way diminish the national wealth, merely being a transfer of wealth from those who have a right to it to criminals who do not.

It is precisely in the support of the *total background* of such corruption, of which the corruption itself is only a wart, that the Republican and Democratic parties seem to have agreed to agree. So, where does the dissentient go? I am not advocating any man's abstention; but I can assure him that such abstention implies no dereliction of civic duty.

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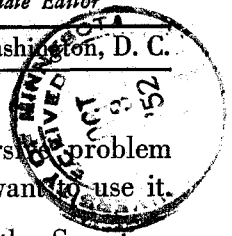
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Friends of Adlai: New knowledge about Adlai Stevenson's role in handling the subversive problem during World War II is accumulating here — ready for use, if GOP candidates really want to use it.

Within the past month, it has been shown that when Stevenson was an Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy in 1942, he conveyed orders from President Roosevelt to Navy officers on the subject of subversives. The orders were to treat Communists and fellow-travellers tolerantly.

Now comes word — as yet unpublicized — that Stevenson was not merely a channel for Roosevelt's decision, not merely a subordinate who took and passed on to subordinates superior orders, but an active participant in this policy of toleration.

Early in the spring of 1942, a board of Naval officers, of which Read Admiral Staton was head, asked that Communists and fellow-travellers among marine radio operators be fired; and the board presented a list of those whose dismissal was regarded as necessary. Stevenson invited Staton to the former's office to discuss the matter. At this meeting, Staton brought up a half-dozen of these cases. After some argument, Stevenson wound up the meeting by saying that, despite the Admiral's recommendation, he saw no reason why the men should be fired.

Some time later, Secretary Knox called the Navy board to his office and told them it was on Presidential orders that the firing of Communist and fellow-traveller radio operators should be stopped. The Admirals had to bow to this decision.

In view of this hitherto unpublicized information, it is proper to ask — what role did Stevenson have in formulating this decision? Indeed, it is suggested here that Vice Presidential candidate Nixon put the direct question to the Democratic candidate. In the past few days, Nixon has shown some outspokenness hitherto absent in the GOP campaign. He delivered a speech at Augusta, Maine, in which he charged that Stevenson was not a fit person to be President because he "ridiculed and pooh-poohed the Communist threat from within"; and he brought up the famous Hiss case, as an example of this threat.

There is, indeed, an accumulation of material which Nixon could utilize in ventilating charges of protecting subversives. Within the past few days, we learned from an authoritative source of a document, on U.S. Senate stationery, initialed "H.S.T."; the document is an endorsement of an individual who has subsequently been proved to be a Communist fellow-traveller, and who has fled beyond the Iron Curtain from the pursuit of U.S. law officers. Due to the Presidential order closing files to examination by members of Congress, this interesting document has never been brought to public attention.

As we go to press, there comes the news of Senator McCarthy's overwhelming victory in Wisconsin — which his critics chose to make a "show-down" fight on what they call "McCarthyism" in this country. If McCarthy had lost, it would have signified that anyone who raised his voice against the evident Communist infiltration in Government would meet a fate at least as dire as McCarthy's. As it turns out, the drive to purge our Government and our politics of this sinister element, not to mention to rebuke and discredit those who have defended this element against such as McCarthy, emerges greatly strengthened and with enormous popular prestige.

In Washington, the event is soberly assayed as of great magnitude. It may have — if Ike and Nixon see fit to exploit it — considerable repercussions on the current Stevenson ascendancy. No observer here doubts that the subversive issue is Adlai's "heel of Achilles". Between now and November, McCarthy will

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presumably make this a national issue. If Eisenhower and his running mate follow suit, the present lead of Stevenson (such is the general estimate in Washington) may be severely diminished, if not eliminated.

Ike and Agriculture: It is rumored here that Mr. John Bird, Associate Editor of the *Country Gentleman*, played an important role in preparing the speech which Ike delivered to the farmers in Minnesota. Bird was once an employee of the Department of Agriculture under Henry Wallace. He is also said to be close to Mr. Milton Eisenhower (Ike's brother), who has been in charge of Ike's agricultural thinking (if any). Milton was also in the Department of Agriculture under the celebrated Mad Milkman from Iowa. In short, the old "Triple-A" thinking of "plow-under" and "price supports" has come wondrously to flower in the GOP candidate's statement of his official agricultural policy.

The speech has irked conservatives in the GOP who find it even more "statist" than Stevenson's speech to the same assemblage. Many are mystified as to why Ike should take this position. The above report about Bird and Milton Eisenhower provides a logical explanation.

Confusion in Dixie: An anti-Administration, rather than a pro-Eisenhower, wave is sweeping Dixie. Revolts and rumors of revolt come from Texas and Louisiana, flashes of fire and whiffs of smoke from Mississippi and South Carolina. But all such phenomena are muffled, inhibited, confused, apparently ineffective.

What's the reason? The leaders of the Southern revolt this year failed to unify their forces before the Convention. Russell "flivvered" badly. (Byrd should have led the South; but he was running for re-election and hence could not do so.) The masterful guile of the Administration manipulators, Rayburn et al, finished the job of sowing division among Southerners. Meanwhile, Stevenson allayed much Southern discontent by pretending to be a "middle-of-the-roader". Now, today, Stevenson has thrown off the mask of "middle-of-the-roader" and stands revealed as a regular left-wing Fair Dealer by his opposition to state ownership of tidelands oil and his position on FEPC.

Why don't the Southerners go all-out for Ike? Because (1) many do not trust Ike — he's wobbled on the Tidelands issue and he's surrounded by "liberals" who want FEPC; (2) Southern members of Congress, therefore, think it would be better to suffer Stevenson. A Fair Deal Democratic President would ensure the continuance of the Southern Democratic-GOP conservative coalition in Congress which has blocked Fair Deal legislation for many years. If Ike were President, these Southerners feel, the "liberal" advisers would seduce many Republicans away from the conservative coalition. Under Stevenson, Southern conservatives would know how, out of long experience, to deal with a "liberal" Democratic President. Finally, not a few Southern members of Congress fear, perhaps unjustifiably, the loss of chairmanships and seniority, if they revolted.

What effective course can the Southerners take now? Every state committee has the power to announce the release of state presidential electors from obligation to vote for Stevenson. Since these electors are usually members of state machines, this means "holding out" Southern electoral votes from both candidates? What would this accomplish? If neither major candidate gets a majority on November 4, the South could cast its votes for a Southern leader (perhaps Byrd). The election would then be held in the House of Representatives. Whether or not a Southerner would be in line for House election, the South would indisputably hold the balance of power and could bargain strongly for its own protection.

Taft-Hartley: It sounds paradoxical, but some observers here believe the Congressional fight to maintain the Taft-Hartley labor law would be easier if Stevenson rather than Eisenhower were elected President. Coming right after Stevenson's pledge to organized labor to repeal the famous labor law, such a remark certainly requires elucidation. The explanation is, as follows:

It may be recalled that the Congress which assembled in January, 1949, after Truman's re-election, faced a grim situation. The President had campaigned on a left-wing program, one principal point of which was repeal of Taft-Hartley. The Republicans had lost 75 seats in the House. But the fact that the challenge was great drew supporters of the Act, from both parties, into a close-knit alliance. The issue was an uncomplicated one — repeal or no repeal.

If Stevenson is elected in November, the ensuing situation will be as grim for conservatives as that following the '48 election. But the coalition in Congress may well have as good a chance of blocking repeal as they did four years ago. They know how to do it from experience. And, Stevenson's pledge of outright repeal may prove of advantage in arousing determination to defeat repeal.

On the other hand, if Eisenhower should be elected, the prospect would appear to be quite different. So far as can be discerned, Ike does not stand for repeal, but only modification. The attitude of the "liberal" Republicans who surround him is likely to be one of "modifying" the Taft-Hartley Act. Observers here warn that in such "modifications" may be concealed "nullification". If, for instance, Sen. Wayne Morse should be given a big role in the modification process, many treacherous compromises could be passed rendering the Act useless. It is more difficult to rally forces against innocent-seeming compromises than against outright repeal.

A Canadian View: As the much publicized meeting of Taft and Eisenhower approaches, we offer the following estimate of the two men, and the campaign situation, as written after the nomination. The author is the distinguished — and highly individualistic — editor of the *Montreal Financial Times*, E. C. Ertl.

"We think the general ought to be elected so that the mortgage on the U.S. government which specific groups have acquired these past twenty years can finally be cancelled. He ought to be elected, if only to prove that Americans have not yet forgotten how to throw out an Administration. It is important for Canada too, for we are right next door. . . .

"Americans obviously want a real change or no change at all. The possibility of a real change is slim. . . . The people who wanted a real change, the 48 per cent of the voters who have not voted during the phoney fights of Dewey against the foreign and domestic New Deal: these people have not much more reason today than they had in 1948 or in 1944 to walk across the street. . . . We do not think the general will win. He has no message, except his charm and his personality and his honesty. . . . We doubt whether personal qualities alone can offset the votes of twenty-four million recipients of monthly government checks. . . .

"MacArthur, the man who called for a searching of souls — who wants to bother about that today? — that man had to go. Taft, the only man with a set of practical principles, a set of alternatives that make sense — that man had to go. . . . They had to go because they had committed the sin which Monstrous Internationalism can never forgive. They were, as Americans, for America first. . . . They have gone, accompanied by the violent jeering of the press, even of most of the Canadian press, which makes one wonder, since we cheer nationalism in the one and jeer it in the other."

NATO: Within the last 48 hours, Secretary of the Army Pace gave a rosy report on the military situation in Europe, after his return from a trip of inspection. While such favorable official statements are usual, nevertheless many observers here believe that Pace wanted to discredit another and quite different report which has been going the rounds of informed circles in the Capital.

This latter and highly secret report derives from what General Ridgway is said to have told the Pentagon about the "progress" of the European Army. From the day when the new commander took over the European task from retiring General Eisenhower, there has been much speculation here about

what the blunt and forthright Ridgway would write to Washington. It was felt that the General would pull no punches in criticism of the set-up in Europe if he thought it necessary.

Within the past few weeks, Ridgway's first report arrived in the Defense Department. Although no precise details are as yet available, it's judgment on progress in creating a Western European army is said — by the grapevine — to be sharply negative. Nor is Ridgway sanguine about NATO's future. Pace's jolly little talks with the press may well have been designed to offset what Ridgway is supposed to have reported. But Pace's talk wears thin; military experts in the press noted that the Army Secretary talked mainly about military progress in the Greek and Turkish armies, very little about the situation in Britain, France and other countries of Western Europe.

On the Hill: The Democratic primary victory of Martin Dies for Congressman in Texas is tantamount to election. So, talk runs round the Capital — among staff circles and the few members who happen to be in town — about Dies' role when he arrives to take his seat next January in the House. The substance of the conversation is that Dies may resume his old post as chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, if — as appears likely — the Democrats organize the House.

At first, this seems like a rather surprising development in view of the seniority rules of the lower chamber. But, those who relay the story insist that shifts can take place and the famous Texan can once more head the body which, largely due to his efforts, became a parliamentary standing committee. It is recalled that Dies retired in 1944, probably because CIO agitation in his district on account of his exposures of Communists made his political situation at home difficult. Also, at the time, Dies was not physically well. His return will be in the nature of a triumph. That will certainly not hurt any movement to give him his old chairmanship.

— There is also discussion — these dog days under the big dome — as to whether or not Senator George will choose to become Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee (if the Democrats organize the Senate). If so, he would be not only the successor to Senator Tom Connally, who will retire to private life after this session, but also a welcome change in the direction of this key body. George held the Foreign Relations chairmanship in 1940-1, but preferred to shift in the following session to the chairmanship of the Finance Committee. At the time, George deemed the latter a more important post, in view of the struggle between Southern conservative Democrats and the New Deal Executive over financial issues. But, in the recent sessions George has shown increasing awareness that Foreign Relations, because of our vast commitments abroad, assumes at least as much importance to the fiscal soundness of the country as Finance.

Red Black Market: Reuters reports that one can often buy goods on the flourishing Soviet black market at less than legal prices; or, which is the same thing, better quality goods at the same prices. Giving *Pravda* as its source of information, the British news agency ascribes this odd result of price controls to the practice of stealing supplies from the government by men on the management level. The difficulty in apprehending the purloiners is due to the fact that the purchasers of the goods are high officials, including local public prosecutors. Some culprits, however, became over-confident and carelessly went outside this charmed circle for trade, and were therefore caught. In some cases, the illegal operators have lost their jobs for such practices, but, instead of being punished, have turned up as managers of other plants. "The real 'kings' of the black market", says the report, "are the men who sell illegally to the state stores."

All of this simply underlines the fact that controls do not control because there is no way of controlling the controllers. They are also human.

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